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RE-READING OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *NO LONGER AT EASE* :
A FEMININE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In his fictions, Chinua Achebe, the man widely believed to be the father of African writing, presents the condition of woman in different stages of social evolution, starting from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial periods in Nigeria. Generally, Achebe is considered to have depicted woman in her marginalised existence. In his fictional world, apparently woman is a weak and trivial individual compelled to accept the domineering male authority in both individual and social activities of life. But Achebe's portrayal of woman in the patriarchal Nigerian society needs to be re-considered in the context of the moral issues addressed by him in his fictions. A close scrutiny of his novels including *No Longer at Ease* gives the impression of his strong faith and confidence in female power. The feminine principle in terms of traits like responsibility, relationships, sensitivity, compassion, peace and joy are extolled by him and woman, although implicitly, is presented as a moderating agent closely linked with the moral aspect of life. Thus in his novels, the oppressed and dominated woman folk turns out to be the dominating and controlling force maintaining the balance and harmony in life and society. The consequences of the detachment from the female power/principle are shown to be imminent disaster and moral degeneration. The paper attempts to highlight the extent of female power in *No Longer at Ease* by locating it at the core of moral well being of individual and society.

Key Words: Acquisitiveness, Feminism, Morality, Nigeria, Patriarchal.

Introduction

The traditional African world as depicted in Chinua Achebe's fictions, is patriarchal and patrimonial in which woman, apparently a voiceless and inconsequential entity, seems to be subjected to male domination and subsumed by man in every sphere of life. In the context of Nigeria, Rose Ure Mezu states that Nigeria's traditional culture was "masculine-based even before the advent of the white man...in creating a masculine-based society, Achebe merely putting literature to mimetic use, reflecting existing traditional mores" (Mezu 1). The gender inequality, both at societal and familial levels, characterizes all three of Achebe's novels forming his proposed trilogy comprising of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964). While the vibrant traditional Igbo life along with its catastrophic conflict with the western culture forms the core of *Things Fall Apart*, his third novel *Arrow of God* is set about twenty years after Africa's confrontation with the West portraying the plight of the self-sustained Igbo society under the destabilizing

impact of colonialism. *No Longer at Ease*, the postscript to Achebe's first novel is set in the last phase of the colonial occupation in Nigeria in 1950s. This paper attempts to explore the strong presence of the female principle/ power in the male-dominated African society by tracing the extent of the feminine power in shaping and moulding the character and destiny of the individual as well as of the society.

Discussion

The action of *No Longer at Ease* is centred on Obi, the grandson of Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* and the son of Nwoye who embraced Christianity in his search for a new way of life. Consequently *No Longer at Ease* shows the extent of changes initiated in *Things Fall Apart* in the social and spiritual life of the Igbo people due to the colonial invasion. The Nigerian social, cultural and political history move forward about half a century and the setting shifts from the traditional village to Lagos mainland, the bustling city bearing signs of moral degeneration. The heroic and dignified world of *Things Fall Apart* has given way to a materialistic environment which has engendered rampant corruption in all spheres of life. *No Longer at Ease* is basically concerned with the exposition of morally degraded state of Nigeria with instances of corruption, bribery, stealing, nepotism and numerous acts of selfishness. These evil practices are associated with the motive of 'acquisitiveness' – a theme, which according to Killam, is explored and elaborated in the novel. He states: "Corruption is the logical extension of acquisitiveness. This is the domination of the 'male' principle." (Killam 43). Yet an insightful study of the narrative reveals the presence of the strong 'female' principle in terms of responsibility and relationship which Jaggar identifies with the female way of moral reasoning (Jaggar 363-64). The impact of the 'female' principle on Obi's consciousness is quite evident in his utter disgust and impatience with the corrupt practices he witnesses in Lagos. It is an expression of his strong sense of moral responsibility linking his reasoning with the feminine principle. His nostalgic poem on Nigeria written during his stay in England cannot be brushed aside by terming it as an articulation of immature and idealistic vision as it aptly extols feminine traits like joy, nature, peace and life:

How sweet it is to lie beneath a tree...
 How sweet to leave out earthbound body in its mud,
 And rise towards the music of the spheres,
 Descending soft with wind,
 And the tender glow of the fading sun. (Achebe 14-15)

Unfortunately towards the end Obi yields to corruption under tremendous financial pressure and gets arrested for bribery which will evidently ruin his life. At this juncture, it is very important to recognize the fact that Obi's moral degradation has started after being detached from the two important female characters in his life – Hannah Okonkwo, his mother and his girlfriend Clara Okeke. Their formidable presence in Obi's consciousness is evident in the following lines:

Mercifully he had recently lost his mother, and Clara had gone out of his life. The two events following closely on each other and dulled his sensibility and left him a different man, able to look words like 'education' and 'promise' squarely in the face. (2)

The novel begins with the trial of Obi, a senior civil servant, for accepting a bribe of twenty pounds. The complex circumstances leading to his present state of ignominy are then narrated in the form of long flashback showing the role of the social forces characterised by masculine 'acquisitive' motive in his downfall. The erosion of moral values and the extent to which different institutions in Nigeria are abused get reflected in the people's interest and reaction to Obi's trial:

Every available space in the court-room was taken up. There were almost as many people standing as sitting ... some Civil Servants paid as much as ten shillings and sixpence to obtain a doctor's certificate of illness for the day. (1)

Such public interest in Obi's trial is due to the prevailing corrupt system with which they are also closely involved. The Umuofia Progressive Union that borne the expenses for Obi's education in England is also not much offended by his misdeed but blames him for taking such a meagre sum of money as bribe and for his lack of prudence:

The President said it was a thing of shame for a man in the senior service to go to prison for twenty pounds ... 'I am against people reaping where they have not sown. But we have a saying that if you want to eat a toad you should look for a fat and juicy one.' (5)

In the sequence of events in which Achebe puts Obi in confrontation with the actual situation in Nigeria, shatters the idealistic picture of his noble country that he cherished abroad. He encountered a young custom official on the day of his arrival at Lagos and found that he was ready to reduce the duty on the radiogram by three pounds provided Obi did not insist on getting government receipt. Since Obi had refused he happened to be the last person in the boat cleared by the custom officials. Along with bribery, nepotism – another form of acquisitiveness is also shown to be prevalent in modern Nigeria. Mr. Mark who comes to bribe Obi for his sister's scholarship expects special favour for being an Igbo like Obi: "We are both Ibos... It is all very well sending in forms, but you know what our country is, unless you see people..." (79).

In such a social environment, Achebe traces the career of his idealistic hero from a brilliant student to a civil servant accused of bribery and corruption. Obi's strong moral awareness, enforced by his intellectual insight that he has acquired through education makes him resolved to rid his country of malpractices. His conviction which relates him to the feminine ethics is well reflected in his conversation with Christopher, an economist obtaining degree from the London School of Economics:

'The Civil Service is corrupt because of these so-called experienced men at the top,' said Obi....'But take one of these old men. He probably left school thirty years ago in Standard Six. He has worked steadily to the top through bribery – an ordeal by bribery. To him the bribe is natural. He gave it and he expects it. (17-18)

Although the Umuofia Progressive Union booked a luxurious room for Obi in an expensive hotel on his arrival in Lagos, he refused to stay there and shared the ordinary apartment of his school-friend Joseph, a clerk in the Survey Department.

The Umuofian Society, as represented in the Umuofia Progressive Union, seems to uphold the values of the past and clings to the bond of clan brotherhood. But the objective of the tribal unity seems to be ensuring jobs for the members of its community and to protect their self-interest in the cosmopolitan urban locality in Lagos. The members of the Union made considerable sacrifice as "they taxed themselves mercilessly" (6) to collect money for Obi's education in England. The acquisitive and possessive attitude of the Union is reflected in the Secretary's address to Obi:

'... "Ours is ours, but mine is mine." Every town and village struggles at this momentous epoch in our political evolution to possess that of which it can say: This is mine." We are happy that today we have such an invaluable possession...' (29)

The members of the Union who paid the expenses for Obi's education wished him to pursue the study of law in England to handle all their land cases against their neighbours. But Obi asserting his self-will opted for the study of literature: Joseph mentions his qualification as "B.A. (Honours) Classics"(70). Obi's decision to study literature can be linked to a skillfully constructed childhood incident involving his mother. Being the wife of a catechist, Hannah was forbidden by her husband to tell traditional folk tales to her children. Obi observes:

She was a very devout woman, but Obi used to wonder whether, left to herself, she would not have preferred telling her children the folk-stories that her mother had told her. In fact, she used to tell her eldest daughters stories. (52)

During his schooldays, once he felt deeply humiliated for his inability to narrate a folk tale in his mother tongue in the 'oral' – the "lesson which he loved and feared" (53). As he was ridiculed by his classmates he burst into tears and after reaching home told his mother about the disgraceful incident. She secretly narrated a folk tale to him which he brilliantly reproduced in the class a few weeks later with little improvisation that entertained everyone in the class. The sense of success that Obi experienced through his mother's help appears to be a motivating factor in Obi's selection of literature as honours subject for his degree in England.

Obi's estrangement from the traditional society is also figuratively presented through a boyhood incident associated with his mother. When he was around ten, his mother's hand was severely wounded while washing his clothes by the rusty razor-blade that he carelessly kept in his pocket. Often he affectionately used

to remember his mother returning home with her hand dripping with blood. The incident is crucial in the context of Obi's relation with the traditional culture. His mother, narrating folk tales, undoubtedly stands for traditionalism and Obi, hurting her with the western implement of razor-blade that he used for sharpening pencil, becomes a potential threat to his native tradition through his western education. In the words of Philip Rogers: "The relevance of this episode to Obi's cultural estrangement lies in the special uses of Obi's razor: sharpening pencils and cutting up grasshoppers" (Rogers 167). The damage incurred by the traditional African life due to the western intrusion is brilliantly presented by Achebe with remarkable economy of expression.

The traditional attitude of Obi's mother comes into conflict with his decision to marry Clara Okeke, an Osu - a forbidden caste because in the ancient past, her "great-great-great-great grandfather" (65) was dedicated to serve a deity. He was isolated from the society and his descendants were considered outcasts in the traditional Igbo society. Obi's meeting with Clara during his homecoming journey has led to a deep relationship in course of time. Although he had been intimate with a number of girls in England before meeting Clara, his feelings were never sincere towards them:

"There was always a part of him, the thinking part, ...watching the passionate embrace with cynical disdain. The result was that one half of Obi might kiss a girl and murmur: 'I love you,' but the other half would say: 'Don't be silly.' And it was always this second half that triumphed in the end With Clara it was different" (63).

Yet Obi vacillates while facing opposition from his mother who has threatened to kill herself if he gets married to an Osu. A sheer terror shakes Obi as he has been very sensitive towards his mother sharing a strong bond with her. His homecoming event after his four year stay in London has not been a happy event for him due to her prolonged illness:

"She had grown so old and frail in four years that he could hardly believe it...she came and hugged him and put her arms round his neck ... tears rose in his eyes.

Henceforth he wore her sadness round his neck like a necklace of stone" (50).

Her opposition in regards to Clara has been quite unexpected for Obi. His father, although quite rigid in this matter yet seems to be weakening. Ironically Obi is confident of winning his mother as he has considered her "like an equal, even from his childhood" (121). His mother first narrates her dream of termites eating up her bed - a vision foreshadowing her impending death. Then she pronounces her firm decision to his utter dismay: "But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself" (123). Her desperate words render him powerless and irresolute. He returns to Lagos in a state of stupor and seeks to postpone his marriage to Clara: "All we need to do is lie quiet for a little while." (129). But for Clara, although pregnant with Obi's child, it is all over. Yet she allows Obi to arrange her abortion which, of course, has gone very badly. Later on she refuses to see him perhaps, recognising his weak and irresolute nature. His indecisive and passive self renders him inactive in the most crucial moment in his life. While Clara is taken by the doctor for the abortion, he momentarily feels an urge to bring an end to the whole process: "Obi wanted to rush out of his car and shout: 'Stop. Let's go and get married now.' But he couldn't and didn't." (135). Later on, in utter desperation, he crumples and flings the paper containing his visionary poem on Nigeria, an action indicative of his transformation from an idealistic youth to an unscrupulous person.

Obi seeks reconciliation with Clara by sending her a note suggesting that they can still resolve the problem. But she returns the note unopened. Her practical insight has made her realize the hopeless prospect of relationship with Obi. Despite her education in England she neither seeks to go against the traditional taboo regarding the 'Osu' concept nor does she express any disdain for it. The typical 'female' traits like sense of community, responsibility and maintenance of peace bar her to follow the path of aggression.

In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe shows the female characters, Hannah and Clara exerting positive influence on Obi's life and career, the former, being his link with the indigenous traditional life and the latter imparting moral values and practical wisdom. The ninth chapter of the novel recounts Obi's financial crisis - the burden of insurance, his debt to U P U, his mother's treatment along with other household expenses which prove to be too much for him. The appearance of Mr. Mark with an attempt to bribe him for his sister's scholarship is significant here. Obi resists the temptation and feels elated. Later on, Mark's sister offers herself to him for the same objective. Fortunately Clara arrives at the right moment to save the situation. Her timely

and assertive presence rescues Obi from falling a prey to Miss Mark's temptation. Later on Clara comments: "... offering of money is not as bad as offering one's body." (86). Clara also detests Obi's act of taking an overdraft to mitigate his financial problems. Her reference to an Igbo proverb in this context about "digging a new pit to fill up an old one" (98) obviously shows her practical wisdom. She sends money from her savings to Obi to cancel the overdraft though the money was stolen from the glove-box of his car.

Obi's separation from his mother and Clara has brought a complete transformation in him. The shocking news of his mother's death thoroughly subdued him. But he decides not to go home:

What was the point in going to Umuofia? She would have been buried by the time he got there, anyway. The thought of going home and not finding her! In the privacy of his bedroom he let tears run down his face like a child. (146).

Yet a sense of guilt torments him for not going to village after her death. But when the guilt period is over he feels "like a brand-new snake just emerged from its slough" (150). Ironically, this rebirth actually points to his spiritual death. As his original self has died with his mother he starts compromising with the existing corrupt system. Now he no longer remembers his mother with her bleeding palm cut by his rusty razor-blade but as a woman of action always getting things done, a woman remorselessly killing the sacred goat (150-51). In the state of moral degradation, neither he shows reluctance to accept bribe nor does he exhibit least hesitation in getting physical with the scholarship aspiring young girls. Thus by severing his ties with the 'feminine' traits like emotion, trust and sense of moral responsibility and by acquiring 'masculine' trait of acquisitiveness, he surrenders himself to the prevailing corrupt Nigerian system.

Conclusion

In *No Longer at Ease*, the centrality of the female characters, exerting substantial influence on Obi's consciousness, is a clear manifestation of Achebe's faith in feminine power as a redeeming agent. The traditional gender-centered ethics that bestows superiority of man over woman, is effectively deconstructed in the novel with an emphasis on the importance of feminine attributes like concern, care, compassion, love, harmony and moral reasoning – the defining factors in every relationship and personal well being. *No Longer at Ease* is to be read more than once to understand Achebe's attempt to subvert the conventional notion of woman as a weak and insignificant entity. The novel is a firm assertion of the female power as a potent positive factor that shapes the destiny of the individual as well as of the society.

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Biography of the Author

Nirupa Saikia did MA in English from Gauhati University and obtained Ph D degree in Chinua Achebe's novels from North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong. She is an Associate Professor of English in Government Aizawl College, Mizoram, India and has got thirty five years of teaching experience. Her major area of research interest is African Literature, especially in the novels of Chinua Achebe. She has participated in a number of International, National, Regional and State Level Seminars and Workshops and has published research papers in various International and National Journals.
